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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [HK](#) [CH](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: POPE'S LETTER CLARIFIES CATHOLIC DOCTRINE IN CHINA

REF: A. VATICAN 111
[1](#)B. HONG KONG 1777
[1](#)C. VATICAN 103

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Classified By: E/P Chief Laurent Charbonnet. Reasons: 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Monsignor Eugene Nugent, the papal representative in Hong Kong, told us that Pope Benedict's long-awaited letter to Chinese Catholics was intended to clarify the relationship between the underground Catholic and the PRC's "official" Catholic communities. After the ordinations of three PRC bishops lacking papal approval last year, the Pope's letter clarifies traditional Catholic principles in unequivocal terms, said another Catholic contact. The papal letter stresses two points: 1) The Pope -- not the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) -- has the sole authority to appoint bishops; and 2) Chinese bishops are supervised currently by other "state agencies" (such as the Religious Affairs Bureau and the CPA), a situation incompatible with Catholic doctrine. Separately, Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen released a statement and noted some errors in the Chinese translation of the Pope's letter (likely introduced when Vatican translators converted the text from traditional Chinese to simplified Chinese). According to Nugent's sources, the Beijing Catholic Diocese was expected to hold an election to choose a replacement for Bishop Fu Tieshan on July 16, the likely winner of which seems "acceptable" but lacks overseas training. End Summary.

Restating Traditional Catholic Doctrine

[1](#)2. (C) Monsignor Eugene Nugent, the papal representative in Hong Kong, told us that Pope Benedict's long-awaited letter to Chinese Catholics was intended to clarify the relationship between the underground Catholic and the PRC's "official" Catholic communities (Ref A). The June 30 letter -- which sets out papal authority over bishop ordinations and a bishop's authority to administer a diocese -- will take time to be fully "understood" by the Catholics in China. The Pope's detailed explanation of religious issues may be difficult for the average Catholic to understand, but with the assistance of the clergy and those with training in Catholic doctrine and theology, Nugent is confident that the Pope's message eventually will be disseminated throughout the Chinese Catholic community.

[1](#)3. (C) Father Peter Barry, Executive Editor of "Tripod" (a Holy Spirit Study Center publication) told us that the Pope's main message is to "reiterate a traditional Catholic

doctrinal message." According to Barry, the Pope stresses two points in his letter: 1) The Pope -- not the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (to which the Pope alludes but does not refer directly) -- has the sole authority to appoint bishops; 2) Chinese bishops are supervised currently by other "state agencies" (such as the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Catholic Patriotic Association), a situation incompatible with Catholic doctrine. After the ordinations of three PRC bishops lacking papal approval last year, Barry believes the Pope's letter clarifies traditional Catholic principles in unequivocal terms. "It is up to the Catholics in China to follow these principles," said Barry.

14. (C) The letter also addresses the relationship between the official and the underground Catholic communities, explained Nugent. The Pope asks both communities to embrace each other and to work towards becoming a unified Catholic community. And for the first time, says Barry, the Church explicitly states that Catholics from the underground community can receive communion from official bishops who have received papal approval.

Errors in the Chinese Translation

15. (C) Four days after the release of Pope Benedict's letter, Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen released a statement noting "some mistakes in the Chinese translation of the Pope's letter and in the 'explanatory notes'" and providing corrections on the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese website (www.catholic.org.hk/engindex/html). Zen speculated to Nugent that the errors may have crept in when Vatican translators converted the text from traditional Chinese to simplified Chinese. This process may have garbled some of the text, especially if a traditional character was converted to a similar, but incorrect, simplified character using the wrong radical.

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16. (C) Nugent wryly noted to us that Zen may have felt some vindication in discovering these errors because Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, had ignored

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his previous offer of assistance with the Chinese translation. In fact, in mid June, Zen had indicated to us his anger at a Vatican bureaucratic process which he claimed appeared to ignore input from him and other cardinals in the field. According to Nugent, Zen sent a letter to Bertone a few months ago and offered to travel to Rome with a priest who is an expert at translating religious text into Chinese; to Zen's dismay, Bertone (a brother Salesian) never acknowledged receipt of Zen's letter.

New Bishop in Beijing

17. (C) The Beijing Catholic Diocese was expected to hold an election to choose a replacement for Bishop Fu Tieshan on July 16, according to Nugent's sources. None of the candidates appear to have any "moral problems" which might automatically preclude their selection as bishop, according to the Vatican's initial investigation. Informally, the diocese has already decided on a candidate and he seems "acceptable" to the Holy See. Nugent has heard good things about this candidate, though he noted the leading candidate was the only one without overseas training.

Retirement?

18. (C) The Vatican is still considering Zen's request to retire as bishop of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, but must first identify a coadjutor bishop, who would succeed Zen upon his retirement. So far, Auxiliary Bishop John Tong is the

leading candidate, said Nugent. (Comment: For the foreseeable future, Zen will remain the Bishop of Hong Kong, even though his high-profile political activism (i.e., marching the full length of the democracy demonstration, Ref B) irritates Beijing and probably causes consternation in the Vatican. End Comment.)

Vatican Dynamics: The Hong Kong Connection

19. (C) Nugent provided a bit of background information on Archbishop Fernando Filoni, who was recently appointed as "Sostituto," the number three position at the Vatican (Ref C). Filoni was Nugent's predecessor in Hong Kong and was based in the city from 1992-2001. During his tenure in Hong Kong, Filon was responsible for identifying and vetting all bishops in China and Hong Kong, including Zen. Zen who is close friends with Filoni, will have an influential ally in the Vatican bureaucracy, predicted Nugent.

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